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Biased Objectivity: An Experiment on Information Preferences of Journalists and Citizens

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Abstract

The present study aims to reconcile conflicting evidence from previous research on the role of objectivity in journalists' and citizens' information behaviors. Drawing on news quality frameworks and confirmation bias research, the article proposes a model of "biased objectivity" that was tested by a quasi-experiment with 430 journalists and 432 citizens in Germany. Results show that both perceived objectivity value (news quality perspective) and attitude consistency of a message (confirmation bias perspective) enhanced the informational value of a message, with objectivity value mediating the effect of attitude consistency on informational value perceptions ("biased objectivity" perspective). Journalistic professionalism did not moderate this relationship.

Keywords

objectivity, confirmation bias, news quality, professional journalism

Recent developments in political communication raise concerns about the viability of democratic processes in complex media societies. These concerns mainly pertain to an increasing polarization in public discourse and a mounting intolerance of its members to deal with opposing political views (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Sunstein, 2009). This situation runs counter to normative ideas of the public sphere as an arena sharing and discussing arguments of different political stances that reflect the diversity of political reality (Strömbäck, 2005).

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A remedy for such deficiencies that has extensively (and controversially) been discussed in previous literature is the idea of objectivity as a means to prevent people's opinions and decisions from being based on false premises. Research so far mainly focuses on the role of professional journalists in ensuring objectivity in public discourse, as journalists traditionally represent particularly powerful members of the public sphere whose main purpose is to provide citizens with the information they need to make free decisions (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Lippmann, 1920). In the Internet era, however, the composition of the public sphere is changing in that citizens gain more influence on what becomes relevant in public discourse. They have similar opportunities like journalists to communicate information to the public (Baden & Springer, 2014), gain more influence as content providers for journalistic media in times of diminished institutional resources (Malmelin & Villi, 2015), and create increasing economic pressures on journalists that eventually affect their news decisions (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). The likelihood for objectivity to resonate in public discourse thus appears to increasingly depend not only on journalists' democratic performance but also on how citizens deal with political issues when selecting, disseminating, or discussing political information.

The present study aims to address this development by examining the role of objectivity for journalists in comparison with citizens. For both groups, this role is less clear than we would expect in light of an increasing scholarly attention on journalism as a "new knowledge profession" on one hand (Donsbach, 2013; see also Shapiro, 2014) and an intensified research interest in studying citizens' subjective biases on the other (Stroud, 2011; Sunstein, 2009). Previous studies rather indicate a puzzling relation of journalists and citizens to objectivity. Whereas *news quality research* suggests a commitment to objectivity for both journalists and citizens, studies that capture objectivity from a *confirmation bias perspective* imply the opposite, that is, a precedence of subjective viewpoints over objectivity considerations.

The conflicting evidence from both research strands reveals a gap that makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the actual feasibility and meaningfulness of objectivity as a normative guideline in contemporary democracies. To address this gap, the present study links both research approaches by a third perspective of "biased objectivity." This perspective specifically looks at the susceptibility of objectivity perceptions to subjective influences. The proposed model is tested on the basis of a quasi-experiment with 430 journalists and 432 citizens in Germany. Results show that messages with both a higher perceived objectivity (news quality perspective) and attitude consistency (confirmation bias perspective) have a greater informational value to journalists and citizens. However, objectivity perceptions were not independent of a message's attitude consistency but, instead, mediated the effect of attitude consistency on a message's perceived informational value ("biased objectivity" perspective), regardless of journalistic background. Findings thus indicate that attitude-consistent messages have a higher likelihood of being published, attended to, or discussed in public discourse due to their higher perceived objectivity. These findings may help better understand underlying mechanisms of polarization and intolerance in public discourse, as they suggest that arguments for one's own side are perceived as providing a more objective picture of

reality than counterarguments. With regard to journalistic background, findings additionally indicate that journalists' struggle for preserving a professional identity in highly competitive media environments may be partially self-inflicted.

Normative Relevance of Objectivity for Journalists and Citizens

Objectivity as a normative ideal greatly resonates in journalists and citizens' understanding of how public discourse should work in a democracy. Objectivity implies a broad spectrum of principles that pertain to two main dimensions (McQuail, 2010; Westerståhl, 1983): First, objectivity requires *factuality*, that is, the reliance on facts that accurately reflect political reality. Second, objectivity demands *impartiality* in that existing beliefs should not affect the selection and interpretation of information relevant to understand a given topic.

Both dimensions of objectivity are strongly tied to the idea of journalistic professionalism. They greatly influence how journalists define the value of their work, the quality of their products, and the role of journalism for society at large (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Skovsgaard, Albæk, Bro, & De Vreese, 2013). Yet, since its inception as a professional guideline for Anglo-American journalists in the early 20th century (Schudson, 2001), objectivity has been repeatedly criticized in terms of its actual desirability for democracy. For instance, objectivity in news reporting is thought to entail a risk of promoting a political status quo, of inhibiting a deeper understanding of political problems, and of distorting the proportional relevance of political groups in society (e.g., Boudana, 2016; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). Despite this criticism, however, objectivity is still believed to be the "(almost) only form of 'good' journalism" (Carpentier & Trioen, 2010, p. 324). It has even gained in importance in recent years as a means for journalists to demonstrate their legitimacy over other types of public communicators with whom they compete in the Internet era (Allan, 2010; Örnebring, 2013).

German journalism has increasingly committed to objectivity as a journalistic guideline within the past two decades. Although looking back at a long "subjective" tradition (Donsbach, 2010), one of the main goals of today's journalists in Germany is to serve as detached observers who depict reality in a neutral, fact-based way (Hanitzsch et al., 2011, Weischenberg, Malik, & Scholl, 2006). However, when compared with their U.S. colleagues, German journalists ascribe slightly more importance to factuality than impartiality: As shown by Donsbach and Klett (1993), German journalists regard objectivity primarily as fulfilled if they present the "hard facts of a political dispute" (p. 66; see also Post, 2014), whereas U.S. journalists mainly consider objectivity to be reflected in a fair and balanced depiction of both sides in a conflict (see also Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

In contrast to journalists, citizens are usually not committed by occupation to deal with political information in an objective way. Although democratic theories often envisage citizens making judgments based on verifiable facts and considering all sides in a political controversy (Strömbäck, 2005), citizens do not have to fear negative consequences when defying normative demands: Unlike journalists whose

professional identity is strongly linked to their compliance with objectivity (Deuze, 2005), citizens do not lose their credentials as vital members of the public sphere when behaving in a way that contradicts this standard. This is not to say, however, that citizens do not feel a need for acquiring an objective worldview. On the contrary, a sense of objectivity seems indispensable for citizens to back up their decisions by differentiating between truth and deceit (Lippmann, 1920; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). This ability forms the basis of any human coexistence, as it helps to grow trust in others. It therefore becomes increasingly critical in current media environments where intentions and competence of information sources often remain vague (McQuail, Graber, & Norris, 2008; Shapiro, 2014). Accordingly, empirical research shows that citizens' trust in information sources greatly depends on objectivity considerations: Media users conceive of news stories as the more credible and trustworthy the less they perceive them as biased and opinionated (Swasy, Tandoc, Bhandari, & Davis, 2015; Tsifti, Meyers, & Peri, 2006). In light of these findings, the objectivity norm appears essential for both journalists and citizens. Whereas journalists rely on objectivity to fulfill their social contract and maintain a professional identity, citizens depend on objectivity mainly as an assurance that the sources they encounter provide a reliable and honest portrayal of reality.

In spite of this great normative relevance of objectivity, however, research yields inconsistent findings on its actual impact on news behaviors. Previous studies have mainly used two different approaches to examine such effects: They investigated whether objectivity as a quality guideline translates into either how journalists and citizens deal with information (news quality perspective) or how subjective viewpoints as counterparts to objectivity influence information behaviors (confirmation bias perspective). Whereas the first group of studies relies on *positive* indicators of objectivity that denote its presence as a quality standard, the latter group uses *negative* indicators of objectivity to help clarify when objectivity is absent. In the following, both research traditions will be outlined and extended by a third perspective of "biased objectivity" that reconciles conflicting evidence from positive and negative objectivity indicators.

Objectivity From a News Quality Perspective

Studies that investigate the relevance of objectivity as a quality standard in journalism usually draw on professional role conceptions. Correlational studies in this area regularly point to a gap between journalists' role ideals and their news products (e.g., Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Scholl & Weischenberg, 1998). This gap is often explained by external factors, such as economic and organizational constraints that can interfere with journalistic ideals (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The few studies that have examined the relationship between professional ideals and journalistic behaviors by means of (quasi-)experimental designs, in contrast, find less-ambiguous effects: A field experiment by Schiffrin and Behrman (2011), for instance, found that reporters who were made aware of their professional values in the wake of journalistic training sessions subsequently produced more balanced articles. Similarly, an early experimental study by Starck and Soloski (1977) showed that journalism students with a higher

commitment to objectivity preferred facts over subjective interpretation in their own articles. These findings suggest that journalists—at least when acting outside their organizational contexts—likely favor information that complies with their objectivity values over information that contradicts these values.

H1a: The greater the perceived objectivity value of a message, the greater will be the informational value that journalists assign to the message.

Perceived objectivity also affects citizens' evaluation of political messages. Surveys show that objectivity regularly ranks highest among citizens' quality demands on political news: Citizens expect the news to provide a fair and neutral presentation of political viewpoints and get the facts straight (Donsbach, Rentsch, Schielicke, & Degen, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2011). These demands translate into what citizens perceive as "good" news and resonate with their actual news use behaviors. An experiment by Urban and Schweiger (2014), for example, found that both attributes of factuality and impartiality largely account for participants' overall news appreciation. A study by Emmer, Vowe, and Wolling (2011) further showed that users exhibit a significant preference for sources that report on political topics in a neutral rather than opinionated way.

Perceived infringements of objectivity, in contrast, are among the most often mentioned reasons for users' dissatisfaction with the news: Today, a majority of citizens think that the media often fails civic demands for an accurate and fair portrayal of political reality (Donsbach et al., 2009; Pew Research Center, 2011). This skepticism is also voiced by citizen journalists, most of all by bloggers who perceive themselves as "watchdogs of the watchdogs" (Singer, 2007) that monitor whether journalists act as they claim, particularly whether they "seek and report truth" (p. 89). A content analysis by Vos, Craft, and Ashley (2012), for example, found that the bloggers in their sample were strongly fixated on objectivity. They mainly critiqued journalists for getting the facts wrong, reporting "half-truths" (p. 857), or distorting reality through one-sided reporting. The study illustrates that journalistic objectivity represents a professional standard with a considerable impact on nonjournalists' quality expectations. Hence, objectivity does not only affect journalistic behavior but also seem to essentially guide citizens' perceptions of political information.

H1b: The greater the perceived objectivity value of a message, the greater will be the informational value that citizens assign to the message.

Objectivity From a Confirmation Bias Perspective

In contrast to news quality frameworks, confirmation bias research mainly captures the relevance of objectivity by its absence, that is, by examining effects of preexisting attitudes on information preferences. Utilizing this approach in journalism research,

previous studies found significant impacts of journalists' individual opinions on their research strategies (Stocking & LaMarca, 1990), their selection decisions (Kerrick, Anderson, & Swales, 1964; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996), and their newsworthiness assessments (Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). Early cross-cultural comparisons indicate that German journalists used to have an even higher likelihood of allowing their attitudes to shape their news decisions than journalism cultures with a stronger traditional commitment to objectivity (e.g., Köcher, 1986; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). Although today's German journalists express an increased importance of the standard in their work, their information assessments seem to remain affected by their political attitudes: A more recent study by Engelmann (2010), for instance, corroborated earlier findings that German journalists attribute greater news values to messages that comply with their own opinions than to messages that challenge their views. A survey investigating changes in German journalism between the early 1990s and 2007-2008 further yielded a smaller but still positive relationship between today's journalists' individual viewpoints and their news decisions (Donsbach & Rentsch, 2011). We can thus expect that German journalists prefer messages that confirm their political attitudes despite their increased commitment to objectivity in recent years.

H2a: Journalists will assign greater informational value to attitude-consistent than attitude-discrepant messages.

This assumption should also be applicable to citizens. Confirmation bias research repeatedly yields significant effects of political attitudes on citizens' information behaviors. Research shows that people usually prefer political messages that align with their own viewpoints, whereas (although to a smaller extent) avoiding opinion-challenging information (e.g., Hart et al., 2009; Garrett, 2009). Moreover, individuals do not only select information in line with their existing beliefs but also perceive and judge messages based on preexisting attitudes. Besides generating counterarguments (Lowin, 1967; Taber & Lodge, 2006), a person can trivialize the informational value of attitude-inconsistent content by various means of biased assimilation, that is, the tendency to evaluate opinion-reinforcing information more positively than attitude-discrepant content (Greitemeyer, Fischer, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2009; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). Research in this area shows that individuals perceive attitude-congruent information as more convincing, interesting, and relevant than counterattitudinal messages (e.g., Jonas, Graupmann, Fischer, Greitemeyer, & Frey, 2003; Lord et al., 1979; Munro et al., 2002). Such perceptual patterns may also explain why citizens exhibit confirmation biases when selecting information for others (Mothes, 2014), forwarding messages in their social networks (Weeks & Holbert, 2013), or linking their personal online sites to like-minded webpages (Himmelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). We can therefore assume the following relationship:

H2b: Citizens will assign greater informational value to attitude-consistent than attitude-discrepant messages.

Reconciling Conflicting Evidence: The Biased Objectivity Model

Previous research indicates that objectivity frameworks come to competing conclusions about the importance of objectivity, depending on the approach that is utilized to measure the construct. Although studies using positive measures (per news quality perspective) suggest a significant relevance of objectivity for journalists and citizens, studies using negative measures (per confirmation bias perspective) indicate that journalists and citizens' information behaviors are guided by subjective considerations rather than objectivity aspirations. These findings may not be mutually exclusive, as they necessarily rely on differing operationalizations of the construct. However, the conflicting implications resulting from both research strands reflect a conceptual fuzziness that should be clarified to draw conclusions about the actual importance of objectivity for journalists and citizens as two key groups shaping public discourse in current democracies.

To advance our understanding of journalists and citizens' commitment to objectivity, the present article suggests a third perspective of "biased objectivity": If journalists' and citizens' news decisions are guided by not only the aim to achieve an objective understanding of reality (news quality perspective) but also the aspiration to reinforce subjective viewpoints (confirmation bias perspective), the resulting gap points to a certain latitude in the individual interpretation of when objectivity is met. In other words, subjective viewpoints may affect the perceived objectivity of a message. This assumption relates to an old debate about the actual attainability of objectivity as a behavioral standard. Ever since objectivity was introduced as a normative guideline, scholars have questioned its underlying premise that individuals were able to observe and describe an external reality independently of their preconceptions about this reality (Boudana, 2016; Kuhn, 1967; Tuchman, 1978). Others have defended objectivity as a "regulative idea" and have proposed ways to achieve objectivity through epistemic strategies that free individuals of subjective influences when dealing with specific information in specific situations (Lichtenberg, 2000; Meyer, 1979; Popper, 1959). Carrying these ideas forward, recent objectivity frameworks in journalism often conceptualize objectivity as a situation-dependent "performance" (Boudana, 2011) or "practice" (Carpentier & Trioen, 2010) rather than a vague generalized norm.

Scholars have rarely addressed these more "practical" approaches to objectivity empirically. However, there is some evidence that our worldviews may even bias the use of such practical strategies that are actually supposed to prevent such biases. Engelmann (2010), for instance, found that journalists' viewpoints influence a message's perceived compliance with specific journalistic news factors, which are thought to help objectify publication decisions in journalism. The author concludes that journalists may (intentionally or unintentionally) instrumentalize news factors to justify news decisions that help promote a particular point of view. Hence, if journalists' individual interests influence their interpretation of objectivity indirectly through news factors, their attitudes may also affect objectivity perceptions more directly by affecting a message's contribution to an objective portrayal of political reality. This danger might particularly exist for German journalists who mainly consider

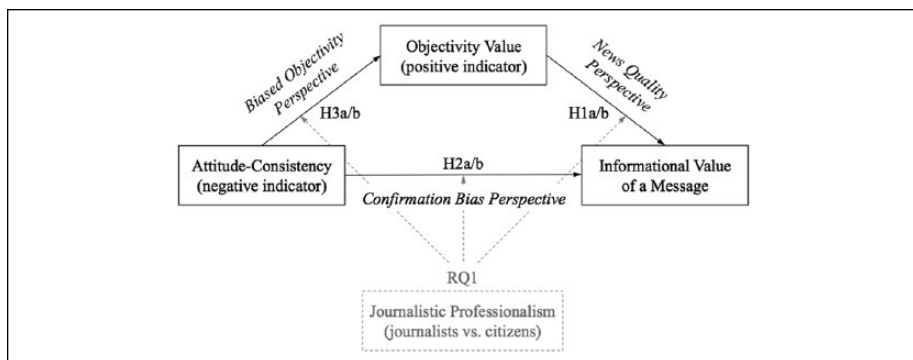


Figure 1. Biased objectivity model of positive and negative objectivity indicators in journalists and citizens' information behaviors.

objectivity as fulfilled when a news report presents the hard facts of a controversy (addressing the “factuality” component of objectivity) rather than a balanced portrayal of different viewpoints (addressing the “impartiality” component of objectivity). In both cases, one can speak of an obligation to objectivity (McQuail, 2010; Westerståhl, 1983)—but with different implications for attitudinal influences: Whereas balance primarily aims to prevent journalists from withholding facts that oppose their individual opinions, a fact-based reporting style may only help repress the mere expression of these opinions. According to Patterson (2008), the latter understanding of objectivity can therefore not alleviate the risk “to select and frame material in supportive ways” (p. 30). How German journalists interpret a message's objectivity value (positive indicator per news quality framework) is thus likely influenced by the attitude consistency of the message (negative indicator per confirmation bias framework). As a result, objectivity should mediate the effect of attitude consistency on journalists' information behaviors (see Figure 1).

H3a: The objectivity value of a message will mediate the effect of attitude consistency on the informational value journalists assign to the message.

Research in social psychology suggests that citizens' objectivity assessments are also affected by preexisting attitudes. Lord et al.'s (1979) seminal study on biased assimilation, for instance, found effects of attitude consistency not only on the perceived relevance of a message, but also on its assumed veracity such that participants evaluated stories corroborating their opinion on capital punishment as more fact oriented and accurate (see also Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockhart, 1998). Similarly, a study by Jamieson and Hardy (2008) showed that citizens perceive campaign claims of the presidential candidates they support as more truthful than the claims made by their opponents. A vast body of research on hostile media effects further indicates that individuals question balance in news reports more rigorously if the given stories contain opinion-challenging information (Reid, 2012;

Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). In line with the proposed “biased objectivity” framework, these cognitive defense mechanisms show a peculiar twist: By believing that messages supporting one’s own worldviews were more objective than opinion-challenging information, objectivity becomes a function of subjective beliefs. Objectivity should thus also mediate the effect of attitude consistency on citizens’ information behaviors.

H3b: The objectivity value of a message will mediate the effect of attitude consistency on the informational value citizens assign to the message.

The implications of these findings may be potentially troubling for democracy and journalism as a profession. If journalists and citizens equally fail to recognize that opinion-challenging arguments are as vital as attitude-reinforcing arguments for ensuring an objective approach to reality, public discourse in contemporary high-choice media environments may become increasingly susceptible to severe misperceptions about political reality and an onward political polarization of social groups. Also, the relevance of objectivity for journalists’ identity and legitimacy would need thorough reconsideration: Why should media users acknowledge journalism as a profession and pay for its contents if journalists do not perform better than the ordinary citizen in terms of objectivity as one of journalism’s most crucial quality standards?

Journalists and citizens have not been experimentally compared yet with regard to objectivity. Although previous studies show that stories written by citizens are often more subjective, opinionated, and one-sided than journalistic articles (e.g., Baum & Groeling, 2008; Carpenter, 2008; Lacy, Duffy, Riffe, Thorson, & Fleming, 2010) and that objectivity is of less normative relevance to citizen journalists in comparison with professional journalists (e.g., Fröhlich, Quiring, & Engesser, 2012; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005), these studies are necessarily descriptive in nature. Moreover, they usually examine a very specific subgroup of citizens, that is, those who are willing to adopt journalistic routines and institutionalized structures at least to a certain extent. Yet, the vast majority of citizen contributions we see today take place outside such (semi-)professional contexts. They rather find their expression in irregular, occasional activities in participatory formats (e.g., on social network sites, in individual blogs, or in comment sections of online news media). To advance our understanding of how professional journalists stand out against citizens in terms of objectivity, the following research question will be examined:

RQ1: Do journalists and citizens differ in terms of biased objectivity as outlined in **H3a** and **H3b**?

Method

Overview

To investigate the relevance of objectivity for journalists and citizens, the present study draws on an online survey that was conducted in 2010, and compared the information

behavior of 430 German journalists and 432 German citizens on different dimensions. The first part of the survey utilized a 2 (journalists vs. citizens) \times 2 (attitude consistent vs. attitude discrepant) quasi-experimental design. Journalists and citizens randomly read either an attitude-consistent or attitude-discrepant expert statement (per confirmation bias perspective) on the lifetime extension of German nuclear power plants. Participants indicated their attitude toward this issue prior to reading the statement. After the reading task, they rated the statement with regard to its perceived objectivity value (per news quality perspective) and its informational value (to gauge the likelihood of the message to be heard in public discourse), among others. Although both statements were manipulated in terms of their issue stance, the number of facts they contained was held constant to test the “biased objectivity” model. The topic of nuclear energy was chosen for this study, as it represents a highly controversial issue that has repeatedly caused heated debates in Germany over the past decades and regularly evokes new controversies in other European countries (e.g., Kepplinger & Lemke, 2016). At the end of the survey, a questionnaire solicited further measures, such as objectivity importance, journalists’ professional background, citizens’ dissemination repertoires, and demographics.

Participants

Journalists were defined as full-time reporters and editors who are involved in the gathering, editing, and publishing of news either as freelancers or as permanently employed members of their media organizations (for similar approaches, see Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007; Weischenberg et al., 2006). To avoid vagueness in comparison, citizens were defined as individuals who are not working as journalists either full-time or part-time.

Journalists were recruited via German journalism organizations that were asked to forward the link to the study to their members. Out of a total of 53 journalism organizations at the federal and state level, 36 organizations (68%) consented to participate in the study. The resulting sample consisted of 447 journalists according to the definition of the population.¹

A comparison of the present journalist sample with the latest German journalism survey aiming to approach representativity (Weischenberg et al., 2006) reveals fairly small differences in demographic variables (results by Weischenberg et al., 2006 are reported in parentheses): Journalists had a mean age of 45 years (41 years); a total of 63% of participants were male (63%), 82% had a college degree (81%). With regard to professional characteristics, fewer journalists in the sample worked for print outlets (49% vs. 60% as reported by Weischenberg et al., 2006) or broadcast stations (25% vs. 32%); online journalists, in contrast, were overrepresented (14% vs. 5%), which likely reflects the increasing proliferation of the online sector within the 5 years between the present study and the reference study.

Citizens received the link to the study by a Germany-wide online access panel for social research. Of its members, 2,473, who were 18 years and older and resided in Germany, were randomly selected to receive an e-mail invitation to participate in the study.

Table 1. Stimulus Material of Expert Statements on the Lifetime Extension of Nuclear Power Plants.

Issue stance	Expert statement (translation)
Pro	German nuclear power plants do not often comply with the state of the art in technology anymore. It is understandable that we have high hopes for renewables to provide safe as well as clean energy in the future. However, it is more than naive to believe that we will have accomplished all the necessary requirements within the next 10 years for renewable energies to succeed. If we shut down our nuclear power plants, we will give up on the most reliable, cost-effective, and climate-friendly electricity producers we have—just because of a publicly poked fear of security risks that are de facto minimal.
Contra	Renewable energies are still not competitively viable today. Nuclear energy instead can be produced cost-effectively and climate friendly. However, it is more than naive to believe that we still depend on nuclear power. Nuclear energy covers only a fraction of our entire energy demand. A lifetime extension of nuclear power plants would have a considerable effect neither on electricity prices nor on climate protection. It would rather interfere with the expansion of renewables. We would yield precedence to a technology that is hard to beat in terms of security risks—not to mention the problematic permanent disposal of nuclear waste.

This procedure led to 527 participants, which equals a response rate of 21%. The citizen sample was 41% male; 25% of participants were 18 to 29 years of age, 48% of participants were in the age between 30 and 49 years, and 27% were 50 years and older. A total of 63% of participants had a high school degree or higher.

For the final analyses, the citizen sample was screened for participants who worked as journalists either full-time ($n = 8$) or part-time ($n = 12$). Following common standards in confirmation bias research, the analyses further included only those participants who held an opinion on the experimental topic. For that purpose, journalists and citizens indicated their opinion on the issue on a 5-point Likert-type scale (*strongly oppose/strongly support*). Only a minority of participants were undecided or did not answer the question (17 journalists, 75 citizens) and were thus excluded from subsequent analyses. This procedure led to a final sample of 430 journalists and 432 citizens.

Stimuli and Pretest

Participants randomly received one of two expert statements about the lifetime extension of German nuclear power plants. One statement spoke in favor of the policy, whereas the other statement argued against it. Both statements were 80 words in length, and consisted of both pro and contra arguments, but were framed differently (see Table 1): The statement supporting nuclear energy comprised three contra arguments that were

undermined by six pro arguments; the statement against nuclear energy followed the same principle reversely (for a similar approach, see Engelmann, 2010).

Both statements were pretested with 77 students who were either enrolled in journalism classes or nonjournalistic social science and humanities classes (60% female; $M_{\text{Age}} = 21.44$ years, $SD = 2.19$ years; 25% nuclear energy supporters). Pretest participants randomly assessed either the statement in favor of ($n = 38$) or the statement against nuclear energy ($n = 39$) in terms of the attitudinal conflict they experienced while reading the statement. Attitudinal conflict was tested with a retrospective single-item scale, ranging from 1 = *no attitudinal conflict at all* to 7 = *very strong attitudinal conflict*. The pretest ensured that the two statements reflected opposing issue stances in that the statement supporting nuclear energy aroused more attitudinal conflict among participants who opposed the policy— $t(36) = 2.48, p = .018, d = .89$ —and vice versa, $t(37) = -2.39, p = .042, d = .95$.

In the main study, the pretested and randomly assigned statements were individually recoded as attitude consistent or attitude discrepant, based on participants' attitudes. For participants who were *strongly* or *somewhat* against the policy, for example, the statement opposing nuclear energy was recoded as attitude consistent, whereas the statement supporting nuclear energy was recoded as attitude discrepant. That way, 49% of journalists and 47% of citizens received an attitude-discrepant statement.

Measures

Objectivity value. The item “abundant in facts” (faktenreich) served as representative of what German journalists primarily construe as the standard of objectivity, that is, providing facts rather than opinion (Donsbach & Klett, 1993). This objectivity indicator was also shown to mainly account for the importance journalists in Germany and other North/Central European countries ascribe to objectivity in general (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Post, 2014; Skovsgaard et al., 2013), and play a crucial role for citizens when assessing the quality of information (Urban & Schweiger, 2014; Vos et al., 2012). Participants rated the item on a 7-point scale (1 = *does not apply at all* to 7 = *applies very much*): $M_{\text{Journalists}} = 2.92, SD = 1.68$; $M_{\text{Citizens}} = 3.90, SD = 1.62$.

Informational value. Following research on journalistic instrumentalization (Kepplinger et al., 1991; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996) and psychological approaches on biased assimilation (Greitemeyer et al., 2009; Jonas et al., 2003), the informational value of expert statements was captured by the item “informative” (informativ) to gauge the likelihood of the message to be published, approached, forwarded, or discussed in public discourse. The item was again measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 7 (*applies very much*): $M_{\text{Journalists}} = 3.15, SD = 1.62$; $M_{\text{Citizens}} = 4.29, SD = 1.61$.

Controls. To account for differences between both samples and deviations of the present samples from their basic populations, analyses controlled for various general and sample-specific variables. General control variables include *gender* (36% female journalists, 57% female citizens); *age* ($M_{\text{Journalists}} = 45.22$ years, $SD = 10.37$ years;

$M_{\text{Citizens}} = 41.24$ years, $SD = 13.34$ years); *attitude direction* regarding nuclear energy (with 15% of journalists and 33% of citizens supporting the lifetime extension policy); *issue relevance*, measured on a 5-point scale from 1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *extremely important* ($M_{\text{Journalists}} = 4.51$, $SD = 0.76$; $M_{\text{Citizens}} = 4.13$, $SD = 0.90$); and *objectivity importance* reflecting the perceived normative relevance of positive and negative objectivity indicators. To capture objectivity importance, participants indicated their agreement to two items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) that were adapted from previous research (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Skovsgaard et al., 2013): The “positive” objectivity item read “A good depiction of a controversial topic goes beyond the statements of the disputing sides and gets to the hard facts of a political dispute” (translation)— $M_{\text{Journalists}} = 6.56$, $SD = 1.09$; $M_{\text{Citizens}} = 5.69$, $SD = 1.67$ —the “negative” objectivity item read “A good depiction of a controversial topic does not allow own beliefs to affect the presentation of the subject” (translation)— $M_{\text{Journalists}} = 5.47$, $SD = 1.83$; $M_{\text{Citizens}} = 5.30$, $SD = 1.81$.

For the journalists’ sample, *work experience* ($M = 16.35$ years, $SD = 10.44$ years), *media type* (49% print, 25% broadcast, 14% online), and *journalism education* (47% traineeship, 35% internship, 30% studies in journalism and communication, 11% journalism school) were additionally included to gauge the generalizability of findings (for a similar procedure, see Skovsgaard et al., 2013). With regard to citizens, analyses further controlled for different information dissemination repertoires that were solicited by three items, measured on 4-point scales (1 = *never* to 4 = *very often*): (a) Citizens’ *online discussion frequency* was measured by the question “How often do you discuss public issues with other people on the Internet (e.g., politics, economy, culture, sports, science, technology)?” (translation), $M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.04$; (b) *online dissemination frequency* was captured by the question “How often do you write own articles or comments about those public issues and post them online?” (translation), $M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.89$; (c) *offline dissemination frequency* was solicited by the question “How often do you publish own articles or comments about those issues in offline media?” (translation), $M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.76$.

Results

Testing Biased Objectivity in Journalism

To test the proposed hypotheses on the role of objectivity in journalism, a mediation analysis was conducted utilizing the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) with 1,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (BCCIs). The analysis included the attitude consistency of expert statements (negative objectivity indicator per confirmation bias framework) as independent variable and the assessed informational value of the message as dependent variable. The perceived objectivity value (positive objectivity indicator per news quality framework) of the message served as mediator. To test the robustness of the examined effects, the analysis controlled for age, gender, attitude direction, issue relevance, objectivity importance, as well as work experience, media type, and journalism education. The results are illustrated in Figure 2 (first chart).

In line with **H1a**, the perceived objectivity of a message positively predicted the informational value journalists assigned to the given message (coefficient = 0.653, $SE = .040$, $p < .001$) while attitude consistency was held constant. Hence, corroborating news quality frameworks, the more an expert statement was considered as matching German journalists' objectivity ideal, the more likely it was perceived as providing an informational benefit. Furthermore, as suggested in **H2a**, attitude consistency also had a positive impact on the messages' informational value (coefficient = 0.575, $SE = .130$, $p < .001$) while objectivity value was held constant. Supporting confirmation bias frameworks, a statement that aligned with journalists' preexisting attitudes toward the topic was thus conceived of as being more informative than a statement that contradicted their individual opinion. Finally, in line with **H3a**, the analysis yielded support for a "biased objectivity" pattern in journalism: Attitude consistency had a positive impact on objectivity perceptions (coefficient = 0.822, $SE = .183$, $p < .001$). A statement that reinforced the initial attitudes of German journalists thus reached higher objectivity scores, which in turn promoted a greater informational value of the message. The relationship between positive and negative objectivity indicators is reflected in a significant mediation effect of objectivity value on biased informational value perceptions (indirect effect point estimate = 0.537, Boot $SE = .125$, 95% BCCI = [.307, .801]).

Testing Biased Objectivity Among Citizens

To examine the role of objectivity for citizens, a second mediation analysis was conducted based on the citizen sample. This analysis utilized the same statistical model as used for journalists, with attitude consistency as independent variable, informational value as dependent variable, and objectivity perception as mediator. Age, gender, attitude direction, issue relevance, objectivity importance, and information dissemination repertoires served as control variables to ensure the generalizability of the model (see Figure 2, second chart).

The analysis revealed the same patterns that occurred in the journalist sample. Corroborating **H1b**, results show that the objectivity value of an expert statement positively predicted its informational value (coefficient = 0.732, $SE = .033$, $p < .001$) while attitude consistency was held constant. Also, in line with **H2b**, attitude consistency had a positive impact on how citizens assessed the informational value of the messages (coefficient = 0.344, $SE = .105$, $p = .001$) while objectivity value was held constant. Furthermore, the analysis once more yielded a significant effect of a message's attitude consistency on its objectivity value (coefficient = 0.491, $SE = .157$, $p = .002$), which supports the "biased objectivity" framework as hypothesized in **H3b**. Hence, the positive impact of attitude consistency on the informational value of a message was again mediated by objectivity perceptions (indirect effect point estimate = 0.360, Boot $SE = .121$, 95% BCCI = [.137, .610]).

Impact of Journalistic Professionalism on Biased Objectivity

To examine differences between journalists and citizens with regard to "biased objectivity" (per **RQ1**), a moderated mediation analysis was conducted utilizing

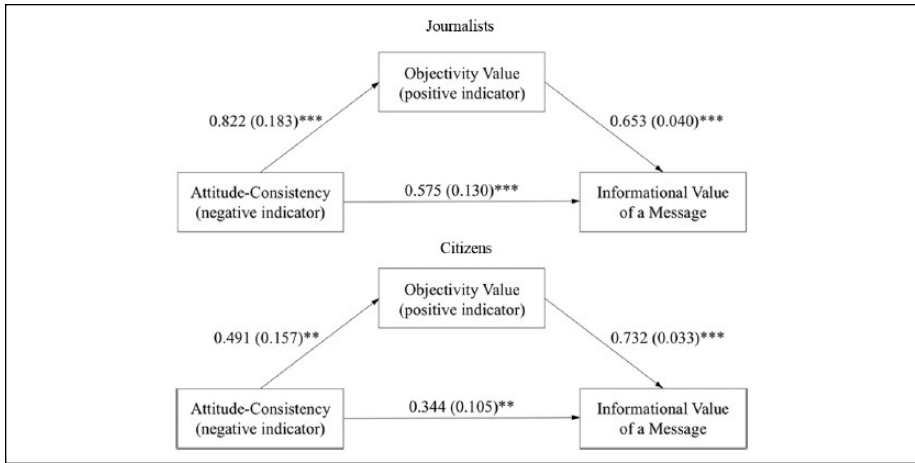


Figure 2. Mediation of objectivity value perceptions on biased informational value assessments.

Note. Indirect effect for journalists is 0.537 (.125), 95% BCCI = [.307, .801]; indirect effect for citizens is 0.360 (.121), 95% BCCI = [.137, .610]. The analyses were controlled for all variables that were measured in either sample. Citizens' objectivity value assessments were additionally affected by age, 0.018 (.006), $p < .01$, whereas informational value was influenced by age, -0.010 (.004), $p < .05$, and online dissemination frequency, -0.191 (.096), $p < .05$. Journalists' objectivity value assessments were further influenced by internship— -0.408 (.198), $p < .05$ —whereas informational value was affected by age, -0.033 (.011), $p < .01$. No other significant effects emerged. BCCI = bias-corrected confidence interval. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) with 1,000 bootstrap samples and 95% BCCIs. Again, attitude consistency served as independent variable, informational value as dependent variable, and perceived objectivity value as mediator. This time, journalistic background (citizens vs. journalists) was included as a moderator in all three paths of the model. The analysis controlled for all variables that were measured in both samples (i.e., age, gender, attitude direction, issue relevance, objectivity importance). Details are reported in Table 2.

Results show that the effect of perceived objectivity on the informational value of the statements did not differ between journalists and citizens, resulting in a nonsignificant interaction effect between journalistic background and objectivity value (coefficient = -0.060 , $SE = .046$, $p = .193$). The effect of attitude consistency on the informational value of the messages was not affected by journalistic background either, as indicated by a nonsignificant interaction effect between journalistic background and attitude consistency (coefficient = 0.102 , $SE = .151$, $p = .502$). Consequently, no moderating effect of journalistic background was found with regard to the mediation effect of objectivity on biased informational value assessments: The impact of attitude consistency on the perceived objectivity of a message was not conditional on journalistic background, which is once more illustrated by a nonsignificant interaction effect between journalistic background and attitude consistency (coefficient = 0.306 , $SE = .226$, $p = .175$). Accordingly, the mediating

Table 2. Moderated Mediation Analysis of Biased Objectivity as a Function of Journalistic Professionalism (Standard Errors in Parentheses).

	Objectivity value		Informational value	
	Coefficient	p	Coefficient	p
Intercept	−0.589 (.407)	.148	3.939 (.268)	<.001
Journalistic background (0 = citizens)	−1.059 (.125)	<.001	−0.435 (.086)	<.001
Attitude consistency	0.655 (.113)	<.001	0.392 (.076)	<.001
Journalistic Background × Attitude Consistency	0.306 (.226)	.175	0.102 (.151)	.502
Objectivity value			0.705 (.023)	<.001
Journalistic Background × Objectivity Value			−0.060 (.046)	.193
Model R ²	.139	<.001	.622	<.001

Note. Conditional indirect effect for journalists is 0.548 (.115), 95% BCCI = [.346, .791]; conditional indirect effect for citizens is 0.373 (.119), 95% BCCI = [.139, .609]. The analysis was controlled for all variables that were measured in both samples (i.e., age, gender, attitude direction, issue relevance, and objectivity importance). Age was the only control variable with a significant impact on objectivity value—0.014 (.005), $p = .005$ —and informational value, −0.012 (.003), $p < .001$. No other significant effects emerged. BCCI = bias-corrected confidence interval.

effect of perceived objectivity on biased informational value assessments was equally pronounced among citizens (conditional indirect effect point estimate = 0.373, Boot $SE = .119$, 95% BCCI = [.139, .609]) and journalists (conditional indirect effect point estimate = 0.548, Boot $SE = .115$, 95% BCCI = [.346, .791]).

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the relevance of objectivity for journalists and citizens, both being decisive actors shaping public discourse in contemporary democracies. To reconcile conflicting evidence from previous research, the study proposed a model of “biased objectivity” and put this model to a first test by examining German journalists and citizens’ information assessments in a quasi-experimental setting. Results demonstrate that journalists and citizens’ determination of the relevance of a political message was significantly affected by the message’s objectivity value (positive indicator), that is, its capability to enable an objective understanding of the given issue (supporting **H1a** and **H1b**). This finding corroborates user-centered news quality frameworks, indicating the importance of objectivity in citizens’ news evaluations (Urban & Schweiger, 2014) and selection patterns (Emmer et al., 2011). The finding also aligns with earlier research that investigated the impact of professional ideals on journalists’ news preferences outside their often restrictive organizational contexts (Schiffrin & Behrman, 2011; Starck & Soloski, 1977). Although journalists’ news decisions are usually incorporated in a complex institutional background, the present finding lends some support to a reconceptualization of journalism and the media as two separate public spheres that increasingly pursue conflicting societal

goals (Carlson, 2011; Fenton, 2010). The objectivity ideal may thus indeed have a stronger positive impact on journalists' information behaviors when external constraints and commercial pressures are minimized.

However, when looking at objectivity from a confirmation bias perspective by measuring objectivity as an absence of attitudinal bias (negative indicator), findings indicate that both journalists' and citizens' information assessments equally depend on preexisting attitudes (supporting **H2a** and **H2b**). In line with earlier research on journalistic biases (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Kepplinger et al., 1991; Kerrick et al., 1964) and citizens' reactions to attitude (in)consistency (Hart et al., 2009; Jonas et al., 2003; Weeks & Holbert, 2013), the present study suggests that two key members in today's public discourse intentionally or unintentionally allow their individual viewpoints to affect the relevance they assign to specific political messages.

Both effects were found to be not mutually exclusive, which helps explain inconsistent findings in previous research. Individual interests rather seemed to rub off on perceptions of objectivity, which ultimately affected the general informational value of the given messages (supporting **H3a** and **H3b**). This finding indicates that attitude-discrepant arguments may be more often denied the potential for enabling an objective worldview and, therefore, less often considered for publication, dissemination, discussion, or mere reading than attitude-consistent information. This result aligns with the proposed "biased objectivity" framework. It complements previous research in journalism yielding that journalists rate the value of information higher if it corroborates their working hypotheses (Stocking & LaMarca, 1990) and utilize professional criteria to substantiate biased news decisions (Engelmann, 2010). The present study also extends psychological research on perceptual biases in citizens' objectivity assessments (Jamieson & Hardy 2008; Lord et al., 1979; Schmitt et al., 2004). Most importantly, however, the study adds to our understanding of the attainability of objectivity in human behavior. Although scholars have suggested conceptualizations of objectivity as an epistemic strategy that helps repress subjective influences in the process of dealing with information, the empirical implications of such practical approaches to objectivity have remained relatively unclear so far. The present study adds some disconcerting evidence to this debate, as it indicates that objectivity is influenced by individual mind-sets even if objectivity is understood and measured not as a vague, generalized norm but as a hands-on epistemic strategy to deal with specific information in a specific situation.

This finding is not limited to citizens but equally applies to journalists. Although journalists' commitment to objectivity is considerably intertwined with their professional identity, the study did not find any substantial differences between journalists and citizens with regard to "biased objectivity" (**RQ1**). Journalistic professionalism neither moderated the effects of objectivity value and attitude consistency on a message's informational value, nor affected the magnitude of bias in objectivity perceptions. Hence, the present study suggests that German journalists are still limited in emphasizing their unique professional value as "society's truth-tellers" (Carpentier & Trioen, 2010, p. 313), which may further reinforce media skepticism among users and instigate patterns of alternative media use. Moreover, this finding corroborates

scholarly concerns about the deliberative potentials of current public spheres (e.g., Sunstein, 2009). When journalists and citizens equally condition the objectivity of information on its attitude consistency, today's public discourse may increasingly risk being built on severe misconceptions about political reality and may lead to a further consolidation of political polarization. This is especially alarming when it comes to controversial topics such as the one used in the present study. Such topics have particularly serious impacts on the political system as a whole, as they are often decisive for who gains and who loses political power (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000).

The present study used a single-item measure of the messages' informational value to compare information preferences of journalists and citizens. An interesting question for further research is "How far this effect eventually translates into actual selection, discussion, and publication behaviors?" Future research may also shed further light on the relationship between what Carpentier and Trioen (2010) called "objectivity-as-a-value" and "objectivity-as-a-practice" by incorporating the present findings into a broader cross-cultural framework (p. 311). As for the present study, for instance, the results need to be seen in light of a journalism culture whose long "subjective" tradition (Donsbach, 2010) might have lingering effects on the behavior of today's German journalists and perhaps even citizens. Future research may increase our understanding of how journalists and citizens in other countries differ from this behavior. Furthermore, the present study has limitations by utilizing only one specific attribute to capture positive objectivity indicators (i.e., the factuality of a message) that might be of less relative importance to journalists in other countries. Although the focus on facts is of highest importance in North and Central European countries (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Post, 2014; Skovsgaard et al., 2013), it is yet surpassed by balance considerations among U.S. journalists (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Weaver et al., 2007). This limitation could also partly account for the absence of differences between journalists and citizens in this study, as journalists naturally have a broader and more multifaceted understanding of news quality than citizens (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013). These differences may be taken into account in future research by comparing the relative effects of more diverse objectivity indicators.

The present study can thus only provide a very first attempt in capturing differential effects and interdependencies of positive and negative objectivity dimensions. Building on and extending this framework might help us better understand why objectivity prevails as an outstanding quality attribute of political news and a crucial trademark of professional journalism. It may also facilitate the search for educational interventions to help increase the viability of objectivity as an epistemic strategy that—despite the challenges it creates for human beings—remains of central normative importance in times when "truthfulness has become one of the toughest ethical standards to maintain" (Kim & Kelly, 2010, p. 24).

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Note

1. Approximately 40,000 journalists could have ideally been approached via these organizations. However, only few of the cooperating organizations could provide precise information about the actual number of active members in their mailing lists. In addition, some organizations had chosen to include the study link in their e-mail newsletters instead of sending individual invitations. As a result, not all addressed members might have noticed the study invitation equally. On these grounds, it was not possible to determine a definite total number of journalists who were invited by the cooperating organizations.

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